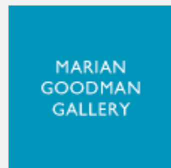

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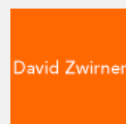

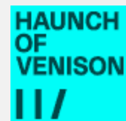

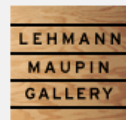

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Rate of Return

Claire Bishop on the Artist Placement Group

View of "Inno$_7$0," 1971, The Hayward, London. © APG/Tate Archive.

IN ITS FORTY-YEAR HISTORY, London's Hayward gallery, like any art institution, has had its fair share of exhibitions that failed to pull in the masses. One of the standard-bearers in this category was "Inno$_7$0," which, according to institutional lore, was the most poorly attended show in the gallery's history. Also known as "Art & Economics," "Inno$_7$0" was intended to showcase the achievements of an entity called the Artist Placement Group, whose mission was to arrange artists' residencies at corporations and government agencies.[1] Confusing to many observers in its day, APG appears a peculiar organization even from a contemporary standpoint. Social change was its object, but not in the sense intended by many of today's socially oriented artists, who seek to facilitate lay creativity from the bottom up and to increase access to the arts for marginal audiences. When APG organized residencies, or placements, the idea was that an artist would enter an exclusive environment of power and interact with employees at all levels of the institution, from management to shop floor. The group's founders, the artists and partners John Latham and Barbara Steveni, hoped such interactions might set in motion attitudinal shifts that would become visible only over the long term—or over an extended "time-base," as Latham termed it—and that would give rise to an alternative value system and to the adoption of the "delta unit," an intangible currency uncoupled from the concept of monetary worth.

So although the placements sometimes resulted in the production of film or sculpture, this was somewhat beside the point for Latham and Steveni. Dialogue was more important, and as such, "Inno$_7$0" offered little of what most viewers at the time recognized as art. Visitors found themselves perusing a wide selection of reports, blown-up photographs, and videotaped interviews documenting the progress of individual placements, since there were only a few works by the placed artists to put on view: a film by Andrew Dipper (made while on board an Esso Petroleum ship); a textile sculpture by Leonard Hessing (made during his placement with ICI Fiber); a gallery full of steel components that sculptor Garth Evans had gathered from a steel mill in Port Talbot, Wales; and the remains of a car that Latham had crashed—an accident that led to his impromptu placement at Clare Hall Hospital near Cambridge. In addition, a large area demarcated by a long white wall—like an art-fair booth, but more open plan—contained shelving units, an information desk, and a table and chairs. Dubbed "The Sculpture," it was the site of daily discussions between APG artists and members of host organizations.[2]

Today "Inno$_7$0," as an early attempt to show social- and process-based work within a white-cube environment, offers an important reference point for contemporary curatorial practice. Yet in 1971, "Inno$_7$0" polarized artists and critics alike. The main focus of critical complaint was the exhibition's dry impenetrability. "It is the atmosphere of the boardroom, of 'top-level' managerial meetings," opined Guy Brett in the London *Times*. "The visual evidence looks no different from company publicity," *The Guardian*'s Caroline Tisdall observed of Dipper's Esso documentation. The bureaucratic ambience detected by these commentators—a corporate variant on what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh subsequently termed (in relation to Conceptual art) an "aesthetic of administration"—prompted anxiety because it seemed to signal collaboration with, or capitulation to, higher management. This is certainly how artist Gustav Metzger, writing in *Studio International*, saw it: He was repelled by what he perceived as APG's attempt to find a "Middle Way," since "the history of the twentieth century has shown that this always leads to the Right."[3]

The most searing critique came from Marxist art critic Peter Fuller, whose December 1971 feature in

the magazine *Art and Artists* ridicules Latham and Steveni's naïveté, gleefully reporting Latham's admission of never having read Marx and quoting Steveni as saying, "Who is Trotsky anyway?" Power relations between business and artist, Fuller asserts, are stacked too heavily against the latter for APG's placements to have any critical purchase, and it is irresponsible for APG not to have acquired the knowledge to perceive this. "One would have thought," he observes, "that for anyone intent on transforming capitalism, and imposing an alternative value structure not based on the commercial premise, or the 'profit motive,' at least a minimal knowledge of Marxist theory would have been obligatory."[4]

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John Latham, *Five Sisters Bing*, 1976, books, 7 1⁄2 x 24 1⁄2 x 18".

At the time, Latham and Steveni didn't take these criticisms to heart; more galling for them was the government's decision to withdraw APG's public funding because, as one official put it, the group was concerned more with "social engineering" than with "straight art."[5] But this could not damage APG's self-belief. The central tenet of Latham's idiosyncratic cosmology was the claim that the universe should be reconceptualized in terms of time rather than space. For him, crucial developments could take place only over the *longue durée*, a dynamic at odds with the short-term orientation of industry, government, and media. Adopting this logic, John Walker explains in a 1976 essay in *Studio International* that the attacks on the Hayward show were premature: It would not be possible to judge the efficacy of APG's projects "until at least 1986."[6] So convinced was Latham of the groundbreaking nature of his theory that he wrote frequent letters to prominent people—including Noam Chomsky, Stephen Hawking, and Margaret Thatcher—attempting to convince them of its significance.

In the event, the assessment that Walker expected has only really begun to take place in the past five years. This process of historical reevaluation has been instigated in part by the interest of a younger generation of curators and artists (such as Carey Young) who see parallels between their own practices and that of APG, and in part by Latham's death in 2006 and the deposit of the group's archive (at the time of this writing still uncatalogued) at the Tate. With the benefit of hindsight, it's evident that APG's activities go straight to the core of contemporary debates about the functionality of art and the desirability of art's having social goals. In order to formulate a coherent history of contemporary practices that imagine social processes as art—particularly those practices whose relationship to the avant-garde dream of social change through art is ambiguous at best—it seems ever more imperative to come to terms with Latham and Steveni's singular and still-contested enterprise. Underpinned as it was by a theoretical system of near-occult complexity, riven by internal contradictions and internecine squabbles, APG makes for a compelling and productive case study.

WHEN APG WAS FOUNDED, Latham had a well-developed solo practice. Today, he is probably best known for using books as a material: building them into towers, burning them, even abandoning them in a fish tank full of piranhas. The most celebrated of these works continues to be his 1966 performance *Still and Chew/Art and Culture*, in which Latham and his students masticated a copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* borrowed from the library of St Martin's School of Art and then returned it as a vial of chewed-up pages labeled THE ESSENCE OF GREENBERG—an act of vandalism for which he was fired. A further affront to modernism took place that year, when Latham and Steveni founded APG. The idea for the group had come to Steveni one night in 1965, while she was collecting detritus for Fluxus artists Robert Filliou and Daniel Spoerri on Slough Trading Estate, an industrial complex on the outskirts of West London.[7] She realized that it might be more socially useful for artists to work *inside* these factories than to use the materials abandoned outside them. Latham, in turn, realized that her idea could be synced with his ideas of time-base and "eventstructure," and APG sprang into motion once Steveni assembled a board of trustees, the following year.

If Latham was APG's chief theorist, Steveni was the driving force behind the placements, and it was she who developed the basic procedure for securing them. She would write to prospective host organizations outlining the goals of APG and inviting these organizations to pay a fee (usually around two or three thousand pounds) to the artist, who would undertake a residency on-site. Companies were advised to think of themselves as having in their midst a creative outsider—in APG's terminology, a nonspecialist "Incidental Person," which replaced the more romanticized label of *artist*. Steveni frequently frames APG as a new form of patronage based on an "open brief," an attempt to

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bridge the gap between artists and people at work so that each could gain from the other's perspective. The placements, ideally, would proceed in three phases: first a feasibility study, then an agreement between APG and the organization regarding practical and legal questions, and finally an exhibition, although this was not viewed as necessary or essential.

Things got off to a rather slow start, but by 1969 the first placements were under way. The artists were well known within the British context of the '60s and '70s, if less so internationally, and included Stuart Brisley, Barry Flanagan, and David Hall. Membership was fairly small; most of the participating artists had a personal connection to Latham either through St Martin's (Flanagan had been his student) or through the "Destruction in Art" symposium that had taken place in London a few years earlier. What linked all the artists was a sensibility: None of them made paintings, and all were comfortable immersing themselves in a new environment and letting events unfold there. As for the participating organizations, the roster in the earlier years was weighted toward business and national companies, such as British Rail and British Steel. Later—partly in response to accusations of collaboration with business following "Inno70"—Steveni redirected her attention toward securing artists' placements in government departments or public institutions such as the London Zoo, where artist/musician David Toop was placed in 1976.

As may be evident by now, APG was indeed staking out what Metzger called a Middle Way, to the extent that the group scrupulously avoided taking an oppositional stance toward the companies with which it negotiated. In fact, political neutrality was a tacit but important principle for APG—and this position seems to be at the crux of critical suspicion toward the group. For Latham, party politics were simply a form of sectional-interest civil war.[8] APG was more interested in seeing what would happen when two disparate ideological domains were brought into confrontation. The idea that outcomes were not determined in advance, and depended entirely on the individual artist in a given context, meant that there was no expectation that the artist would side with the workers.

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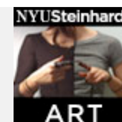

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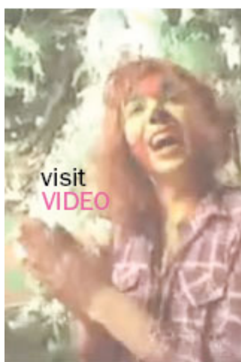

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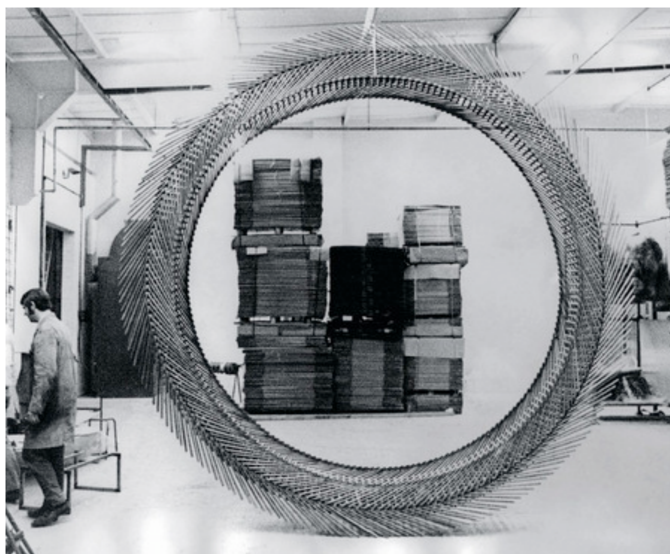
Rate of Return

Claire Bishop on the Artist Placement Group



Stuart Brisley's 212 stacked Robin Day chairs, Hille Furniture Company, Haverhill, Suffolk, UK, 1970. Photo: Alex Agor.

Inevitably, some artists were already politicized, as was reflected in their decisions to work either on the shop floor or at the level of management, or became politicized during their placements. This unsurprisingly led to rifts within the group. Brisley, for example, who chose to work on the shop floor during his 1970 placement at the Hille Furniture Company, developed serious misgivings about APG. His project involved asking workers what they felt might improve conditions on the floor and implementing small changes accordingly—e.g., painting machinery in the colors of football teams chosen by the workers and introducing a mobile message board. Though the placement resulted in a sculpture comprising 212 stacked Robin Day chairs, Brisley felt that the project had begun to confuse his identity as an artist, since the shop-floor interventions moved him away from art and toward "a collective situation"; he was forced to acknowledge a "permanent conflict" between "factory and management."[9] APG, he ultimately decided, was enamored of management, and the group's structure, he felt, perfectly mirrored this allegiance, being "a tightly knit, highly autocratic family business."[10]

Here we are thrown back on the accusations of Metzger, Fuller, et al. To an extent, these critiques are valid. But they also betray a misunderstanding of APG's intentions and of the artistic idiosyncrasy of Latham's thinking. In the latter's eccentric philosophy, the Incidental Person—as a figure who "takes the stand of a third ideological position which is off the plane of their obvious collision areas"[11] —ineluctably transcends party politics. This neither/nor structure was a motif of Latham's thinking. The aforementioned delta unit, a new way to measure human development, was itself a kind of third force —as indicated by the Greek letter's triangular form (Δ). Defined by Latham as a "unit of attention," the delta unit was intended to gauge the value of ideas over the long term, by looking at such factors as the number of people affected, the period of time the ideas remained influential, and the degree of awareness they produced (from unconsciousness to the most heightened state of awareness). As such, the delta unit had the potential to surpass both capitalism and socialism, both of which Latham derided as "mere stratified habits of thought."[12] In this respect, Latham's vision might be seen as a maverick counterpart to Joseph Beuys's contemporaneous desire to reorganize technocratic society under the umbrella of art. Beuys was in fact sympathetic to APG's activities, inviting the group to speak at his Free International University at Documenta 6 in 1977, where he proclaimed, "Incidental Person Yes, Artist No."[13]

What is also often misunderstood about APG is the antagonistic nature of its placements, which instituted a perpetual and precarious (but not necessarily hostile) tension between two opposing forces. As Steveni adamantly asserts, the aim was not to humanize industry through the inherent creativity of artists and their relative ignorance of business conventions. Even granting that APG's negotiation of a critical position vis-à-vis business was idealistic, the best and most productive placements entailed, in the words of artist Ian Breakwell, "abrasive mutual debate."[14] Breakwell's placement at the Department of Health and Social Security involved staying at the high-security psychiatric hospital Broadmoor, working with a team of specialists who had been asked to improve conditions there. He was recruited as a professional observer, the team making use of his "Diary" (an

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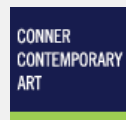
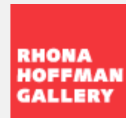
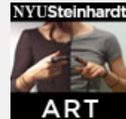
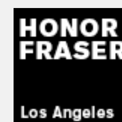
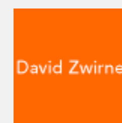






ongoing project in the form of a multimedia journal) to introduce a more consultative approach to their research, in which patients were asked for their views on the prison hospital. The results angered Broadmoor's administrators, who felt that the team had overstepped its brief and "embarrassed the higher level of the DHSS hierarchy"; as a consequence, the research was and remains restricted by the Official Secrets Act.[15] But the team within which Breakwell was based regarded the placement differently, suggesting that the "Diary" should be distributed throughout the country as "a real and lasting image, from [Breakwell's] point of view, of the insanity surrounding insanity." This kind of outcome—in which open-minded organizations might rethink their hierarchy and basic assumptions—is what APG was intended to generate. Never pretending that it wanted to foment insurrection, the group was concerned, rather, with changing the perceptions of those working within organizations.





TO WHAT EXTENT DID APG in fact change perceptions? This is difficult to determine, but we do know that the delta unit has not been taken on board by art criticism; we still stumble around in the nether regions of consciousness, torn between evaluations of social impact on the one hand and artistic quality on the other, never quite managing to fuse the two. It is ironic that APG ended up using the sort of accounting it wished to abolish in order to prove that public investment in the organization had been worthwhile. For example, in the 1980s, APG estimated the value of Breakwell's contribution to the Department of Health and Social Security to be £3.5 million during his first year there. Even when no figures were cited, APG tended to articulate its accomplishments in terms of concrete, short-term benefits. In 1992, for example (by which point APG as such had been defunct for three years and renamed O+I, or Organisation and Imagination), Graham Stevens framed APG's successes in terms of such contributions to the public good as Latham's conservation of monumental industrial sites in Scotland (during his placement with the Scottish Office) and a new museum in Peterlee as a result of Brisley's second APG placement there in the 1970s.

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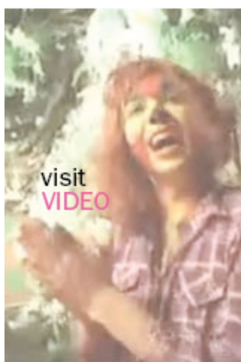

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John Latham and Joseph Beuys at the conference "*Streitgesprache: Pragmatismus gegen Idealismus*" (Discussion: Pragmatism Versus Idealism), Kunstverein Bonn, January 13, 1978. Photo: Franz Fischer/Zentralarchiv.

Perhaps, however, the creation of the delta unit was fulfilled in ways that Latham could never have anticipated. Arguably, it anticipated New Labour's tendency to quantify art's social contributions via statistical analysis (audience demographics, marketing, visitor figures, etc.). It could even be argued that APG preempted the use of artists by management consultancies and that it was a harbinger of the growth of the art-business symbiosis (i.e., the "creative industries") so essential to the current spirit of capitalism.[16]

So perhaps APG did presage social change—if not the kind it had in mind. But if we look at the group in terms of its artistic achievements—which is to say, at the way in which its work reconfigures our thinking about art, its modes of presentation, and our criteria of valuation—the picture is quite different. Here one might cite the group's new model of patronage based around the open brief, in which the artist has carte blanche. The group also clearly contributed to a broader postwar effort to demystify the creative process, by replacing the term *artist* with *Incidental Person* (even if this mystification returned through the back door in the idea of the delta unit). And their contribution to methods of curating socially engaged art should not be underestimated: After "Inno70," APG no longer used the exhibition format, instead presenting its projects through panel discussions, thereby laying the groundwork for the exhibition as "discursive platform" and for the symposium or conference as a viable way to present non-object-based and process-based participatory art.[17]

Perhaps most significant, in the end, is APG's effort to redirect the value of art away from demonstrable indexes and financial outcomes, and its championing of the notion of assessing value over a greatly extended time span. This contribution seems crucial to recent debates over socially engaged art, specifically to the question of how to evaluate such practices, and over what period such judgments should be made. Even if APG failed to fulfill this promise, the urgency of the group's proposal continues to place pressure on the question of what, in fact, individual works accomplish in particular situations.

What needs to be appreciated today is APG's determination to provide a new post-studio framework for artistic production, to create opportunities for long-term, in-depth interdisciplinary research, to rethink the function of the exhibition, and to create an evaluative framework for both art and research that displaces any bureaucratic focus on immediate and tangible outcomes. Although these achievements are more discursive than affective—it's unlikely that they will ever prompt lay pulses to race—they are conceptual steps that anticipate broader changes in art and the economy since APG's peak of activity in the 1970s. In this regard, we should view the political naïvetés of APG as what constitute its singular artistic achievement, and as the force behind its ever-provocative relation to the question, Is it better for art to be engaged with society even if this means ideological compromise, or for it to maintain ideological purity at the expense of social isolation and powerlessness? It is only because of APG's fundamental rejection of an identifiable (party) political position that it could make

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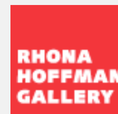

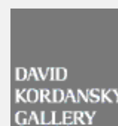

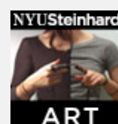

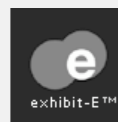

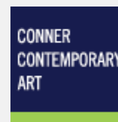

because of APG's fundamental rejection of an identifiable (party) political position that it could make such maneuvers toward power—and this is precisely the organization's limitation and its strength.

Claire Bishop is an associate professor of art history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

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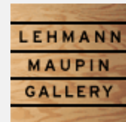

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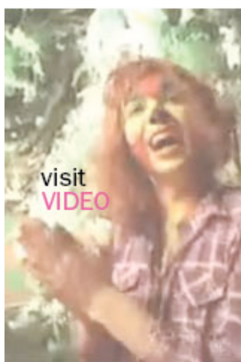

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John Latham, *Untitled* (*On Placement with the Intensive Care Unit of Clare Hall Hospital*), 1970, the artist's crashed car and personal X-rays. Installation view, The Hayward, London, 1971. APG/Tate Archives.

NOTES

1. Katherine Dodd reports that "Inno$_7$0" was a name coined by John Latham as "a kind of complementary otherness to the international exhibition called Expo." Dodd, "Artist Placement Group 1966–1976" (master's thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1992), 17.

2. Latham: "This was one of the bones of contention—the public was not part of the act and they were often very annoyed that they weren't. . . . [T]hey were given a notice board where they could put up their comments." Dodd, "Artist Placement Group," 58.

3. Gustav Metzger, "A Critical Look at Artist Placement Group," *Studio International* 183, no. 940 (January 1972): 4.

4. Peter Fuller, "Subversion and APG," *Art and Artists*, December 1971, 22.

5. Robin Campbell, letter of January 11, 1971, to APG.

6. John A. Walker, "APG: The Individual and the Organisation, a Decade of Conceptual Engineering," *Studio International* 191, no. 980 (March–April 1976): 162.

7. Barbara Steveni, e-mail to the author, August 31, 2009.

8. John Walker, *John Latham—The Incicdental Person—His Art and Ideas* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1994), chap. 13.

9. Stuart Brisley, interview with Peter Byrom (1975), cited in Dodd, "Artist Placement Group," 24.

10. Brisley, cited in Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 234.

11. Latham, cited in John Walker, *John Latham—The Incidental Person*, 100.

12. Latham, cited in Stuart Brisley, "No, It Is Not On," *Studio International* 183, no. 942 (April 1972): 96.

13. Letter of July 18, 1994, from Barbara Steveni to John Walker; 9913/1/4, 9 in John Walker papers, Tate Archive.

14. Ian Breakwell, "From the Inside: A Personal History of Work on Placement with the Department of Health and Related Work, 1976–1980," *Art Monthly*, no. 40 (October 1980): 6.

15. Ibid., 4.

16. In a preparatory document for the exhibition, the APG cites Robert Kelly in *Business Horizons* (June 1968): "If business wants to read its future, it had better look not just at business but at the whole culture of our time, including the arts—painting, music, theatre, literature—and philosophy and religion. It is in these activities that tomorrow's markets, business legislation, and new business structures are most clearly prefigured." The last sentence is cited three times within the document. "Art & Economics 1970 (Inno$_7$0)," working document, undated, early 1969?; uncatalogued APG archive at Tate.

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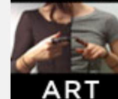

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17. See for example the Industrial Negative Symposium at the Mermaid Theatre, London (1968), at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (1971), at The Hayward (1971), at Garage (London, 1975), and at Documenta 6 (1977), the last as part of Beuys's *100 Days of the Free International University*. Images of Marcel Broodthaers can be seen in some discussion installation shots (presumably the one in Düsseldorf).

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